

*Statement of Wilson S. Rivers  
State of Florida Landowner*

*Before the Subcommittee on Department Operations, Nutrition and Forestry  
March 28, 2001*

**Subject: Implementation of the National Fire Plan**

My name is Wilson Rivers and I am a private non industrial forest landowner from Lake Butler, Florida. Lake Butler is about 60 miles southwest of Jacksonville.

I am pleased that you have invited me to share some views on the implementation of the National Fire Plan. As is all to often the case, a large portion of the population knows little or nothing of the National Fire Plan. Government has defined our problems or needs and propose solutions based on government input. The issues are too critical to public welfare not to get input from the public you hope to protect. Implementation of the National Fire Plan must recognize that there are differences around this great country and not try to approach the solution with a one size fits all philosophy.

I am no stranger to the devastation of major wildfires. In 1998, I experienced major losses as did many other landowners in my state. Florida's 1998 wildfire siege will linger forever in the memory of many. I am no exception. From that experience I had hoped the nation would come to realize that wildfires are not exclusively a western phenomenon and we must adopt a national perspective with plans and strategies that accommodate regional differences. Those differences are many and critically important. They include landownership, fuel types, terrain, population distribution, weather and firefighting tactics and equipment.

I commend Congress for providing \$1.8 billion to address our nation's wildfire protection needs. This is a very large amount of money to address a very large problem that has developed over time. Let's not think we can achieve overnight success or work miracles. A good National Fire Plan must be implemented in a well thought out process that meets national needs but recognizes regional differences. It do not feel it should be the sole responsibility of the federal government to design, fund, or implement a national wildland fire policy. Government at all levels must be participants and committed to solving the problem. The private sector, whether homeowner, landowner or just private citizen, must be educated about the problem and become involved in the solutions since they will be paying the bill.

After the 1998 fires, Florida quickly assessed its needs to be better prepared to deal with major wildfires. It more than doubled its aerial firefighting capabilities, it organized, staffed, equipped and trained wildfire mitigation teams to reduce fuels in and around communities, it purchased specialized equipment, it hired more firefighters, it assisted in training and equipping the National Guard, other state agencies and local fire departments, it strengthened its working partnerships with the U.S. Forest Services and FEMA. At the state level, the Florida Division of Forestry working with the Division of Emergency Management, local fire departments and the forestry industry stepped up and fostered more solid working relationships to address future wildfire incidents. Florida's Division of Forestry also assumed a lead role for bringing and promoting the FIREWISE Communities Program to our state. They have held meetings to brief and train its forest industry cooperators and landowners with equipment. They are currently contracting for a computerized statewide risk assessment. The implementation of the National Fire Plan hopefully will help us continue these efforts and begin new initiatives.

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My recommendations for your consideration on implementing the National Fire Plan are:

#### **I. Fire Prevention**

As I see it, the least destructive and least expensive wildfire is the wildfire that doesn't occur in the first place. There is no more effective fire protection program than a good

fire prevention program. Smokey has served us well through the decades but times have changed and he can't carry the program alone. We must spend the necessary resources up front to lift public awareness for all ages on the importance and personal responsibility for fire prevention. Through well focused research we must identify the best mediums for reaching all ages with a properly targeted message on fire prevention. Landowners, small and large, as major stakeholders must be included in designing and delivering a fire prevention program under the leadership of wildfire agencies. The message must be clear and designed so that the agencies do not send conflicting messages out. I have seen situations where some agencies are working a prevention and suppression while others are stating that the fires are natural and beneficial. This is somewhat hard for the public to understand. You must require the agencies to come together and address these conflicting messages. There are times that fire prevention must take priority over the natural processes, especially when private non industrial lands are burning. The implementation of the National Fire Plan should have a newly designed, well focused fire prevention plan that we all can support.

## **II Wildfire Preparedness and Management**

At the best of circumstances, wildfire suppression is a dangerous and expensive undertaking. It is not a task that can be planned or designed after the fire starts. It is

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imperative that we as a nation elevate our wildfire preparedness to an acceptable level. We are not there. You must develop preparedness plans that accommodate and recognize the differences in population distributions, land ownership patterns, fuels, state and local laws, strategies and equipment. The federal agencies should work with state forestry agencies to develop plans that allow for accessing trained and experienced personnel and proper equipment to meet local needs. We don't need people coming to Florida to take over a fire demanding a topographic map, not knowing the importance of low ground pressure tractors or establishing proper rapport with landowners as some have done in the past. Federal agencies in cooperation with state forestry agencies and their wildfire

cooperators must develop preparedness strategies that include proper training, staffing, utilization and equipping of the available fire suppression resources. It is essential that federal funding support this effort and include severity funding for staging resources in advance in order to assure quick response and catching fires while they are small. The southeast would be a good place to pilot this effort as a key factor in plan implementation.

As a landowner, I have experienced first hand the great benefit of having the right equipment and properly trained personnel show up on a fire as soon as possible. In times of major fire activity such as we had in Florida in 1998, 1999 and 2000, this means resources from the host state, other states and federal agencies must be mobilized promptly as the incidents of wildfire escalates. Once the number of fire starts exceeds the ability of the local fire agencies to respond to new fires, the losses to the private forest landowners in the south can be devastating.

Proper management and control of firefighting is as important as preparedness. The

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Incident Command System (ICS) is the key to success. This effort must be organized around interagency participation. Florida has developed an outstanding system with the Florida Division of Forestry and the U.S. Forest Service forming a unified command with agencies joining as interests are impacted. Proper liaison with other agencies and the landowners as stakeholders assure smooth operations with all interested parties at the table. These incident management teams not from Florida must realize that in many instances they are working on private lands and as such they need to be willing to incorporate our concerns into their planning and strategies for fire suppression. Preparedness and management must be guided by the proper emphasis on safety and cost. The management of wildfires must consider how all the agencies involved can work

together to utilize their best available personnel to achieve success and the Incident Command System appears to do that if properly utilized.

### **III. Risk Assessment and Hazardous Fuel Reduction**

The National Fire Plan emphasizes and funds essential efforts of hazardous fuel assessment and reduction. If we are to ever have an effective wildfire protection strategy, we must be able to target the areas that are most vulnerable because of excessive fuel accumulation. A thorough and accurate fuels assessment is an essential beginning. The assessment must be localized as much as possible and ground truthed. My state of Florida, because of its subtropical climate and fuel types, represents a classic case of this critical need. We are in the first phase of a statewide assessment. The National Fire Plan implementation should support this endeavor.

Wildfire preparedness and management must be considered two of the most critical

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issues in wildfire protection. The combination of State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance are critical components of the National Fire Plan. They help bring to the ground level needed resources and training to help provide assistance to local communities and landowners. It's where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, and I encourage you to support these two programs on a continuing basis. You cannot expect to provide wildfire protection with sporadic funding.

The areas identified as being at high risk because of hazardous fuels must be treated as soon as possible. This need should be addressed across all ownership and should not be allowed to get caught up in the debate over harvesting or roadless areas like it sometimes does on national forest lands.

We must provide incentives, technical assistance and liability protection to private non industrial landowners in order to assure an effective fuels reduction program through prescribed fire, chemical or mechanical treatments. Governments at all levels should

work together in establishing cooperative efforts to achieve fuel reduction in and around communities at risk. The wildland urban interface poses significant wildfire risk in Florida. Fuels management becomes an absolute necessity but rural non industrial private forest landowners such as myself can not carry the full responsibility. Land use planning by local governments, developers and homeowners must share the responsibility. The FIREWISE Communities Program is an excellent vehicle for implementing strategies to protect our communities. The National Fire Plan provides support and funding for these efforts. I encourage you to insist that these programs and other components of risk assessment and hazardous fuels reduction be allowed to occur at the state and local area.

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#### **IV      Increasing Wildfire Fighting Capacity**

Wildfire protection is a responsibility of government at all levels. Each state should provide a plan and resources to meet its basic wildfire protection requirements. This effort should include local government participation, however, state wildfire agencies should be the key player in an interagency partnership that is trained, staffed and equipped to meet wildfire protection demands. State wildfire agencies should provide leadership and coordination with local fire departments. This is essential since, in most cases, local fire departments have primary responsibility for structural fire protection and wildfire resources must be available for statewide mobilization. Local fire departments play a key role in assisting state wildfire agencies in suppressing local grass, brush and small woodland fires. It is important that these essential agencies to our nation's wildfire protection needs have the capacity to meet the demands placed on them. State and local fire agencies must have help in building the essential capacity to meet high demands of large wildfire response. The federal government, both through funding and agency support, has a responsibility to help build this extra capacity—a capacity which will also be available for fires on federal lands. In order to assure proper allocation of valuable resources and avoid duplication, federal agencies should work through state agencies. The State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance Programs are intended to help

build and maintain needed capacity. Congress, through the National Fire Plan, has finally provided more adequate funding for these programs. Let me caution that we must look beyond this year. These are two of the most critical parts of the Fire Plan. I encourage you to provide strong support in future years. If our state and local fire agencies don't have the capacity to provide wildfire suppression assistance to landowners

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like myself and others, then we have failed in our job to provide for public safety and protect our nation's treasured forest resources. Let's not forget to place emphasis on building the capacities of our wildfire agencies through the implementation process. We can greatly increase effectiveness and accountability by bringing our efforts and resources to bear at the ground level.

I appreciate the opportunity you have given me here today. I have tried to show my views and concerns as a private non industrial forest landowners. We cannot meet our objectives by having a one size fits all, top down approach. Interagency participation is essential. Equally important is the interests and input of the private sector.

*Thank you.*